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ABSTRACT

Studies have shown that textbooks have treated the black person as invisible or as a problem and generally have failed to note that bigotry has been a fundamental American attitude since the arrival of Columbus. One might have thought that by 1973 publishing houses would have eliminated the need for this type of criticism, but this is not the case. The Michigan Department of Education has reported on a study of 75 texts used in its secondary schools, and the results are chilling. To insure accuracy and balance the educators selected three reviewers for each text, carefully trying to mix professional historians, classroom teachers, professors of education and district social studies personnel. The reviewers were asked to rate their one or two assigned texts on the basis of accurate presentation of minorities. The two-volume report, constituting the most thorough study of its kind, focused not only on the black role but on that of other minorities, and some reviewers included women in their evaluations. The 46 experts were asked to evaluate the texts on a scale of "Very Good," "Good," "Fair," or "Poor." Of the 75 texts only eight received "Very Good" as a rating, 15 were rated "Good," 31 were rated "Fair," and 21 were rated "Poor." Thirty-one per cent of the ratings were on the positive side; 69 per cent on the negative side. (Author/JM)

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Minorities in American History Textbooks

by William A. Katz

During the civil rights crusade of the 1960's, mounting concern over the biased and inaccurate representation of minorities in United States history textbooks grew to a crescendo of protest. Indeed, one of the enduring legacies of the movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. has been the demand for fair treatment of minority people in school texts and classrooms. This demand has been supported by studies showing that textbooks have treated the black person as invisible or as a problem and generally have failed to note that bigotry has been a fundamental American attitude since the arrival of Columbus.

One might have thought that by 1973 publishing houses would have eliminated the need for this type of criticism, but this is not the case. The Michigan Department of Education has reported on a study of 25 texts used in its secondary schools, and the results are chilling.

To insure accuracy and balance the educators selected three reviewers for each text, carefully trying to mix professional historians, classroom teachers, professors of education and district social studies personnel. The reviewers were asked to rate their assigned one or two texts on the basis of accurate presentation of minorities. The two-volume report, constituting the most thorough study of its kind, focused not only on the black role but on that of other minorities, and some reviewers included women in their evaluations.

The Rating System and Its Results

The 46 experts were asked to evaluate the texts for the accuracy of their treatment of American minorities on a scale of "Very Good," "Good," "Fair" or "Poor." Each reviewer was asked to submit a brief essay to accompany their rating, and these are published in full in the second volume of the report.

Although the critics worked alone, their ratings show a remarkable similarity. In only two texts did the judges show substantial disagreement, and in 19 there was almost a consensus on ratings. There also appeared to be no great difference in the way educators, college professors, historians and district school personnel felt about the volumes under review. No breakdown was made of the racial or ethnic background of the reviewers, though this might have been interesting.

Of the 75 texts only eight (11%) received "Very Good" as a rating, 15 (20%) received a "Good" rating, 31 (41%) received a "Fair" rating, and 21 (28%) received a "Poor" rating. The Michigan Department of Education summarizes its findings in these words: "Another way of viewing these percentages is that 31% of the ratings were on the positive side; 69% were on the negative side." This conclusion gives the authors of the report "a sense of disappointment" for "after a good many years of admonishing textbook publishers to improve their materials in terms of the extent to which they reflect the pluralistic, multi-racial, and multi-ethnic elements of our society, both past and present, they still, on the whole, do not seem to be doing well, at least in the oninion of these 46 reviewers." No one text received three "Very Good" ratings, and only one received two ratings of such high praise.

Whether the texts under review were designed for junior high or for senior high classrooms, they generally received similar ratings from the panel of 46 experts. However, high school texts did seem to score higher than junior high texts, perhaps because publishers or authors felt they could reveal more truth to older students. Some 15% of the senior high texts had a "Very Good" rating compared to seven percent of the junior high texts.

The 75 reviews that form Part II of *The Textbook Report* constitute a gold mine of information about the state of text publishing in America today. Generally, they show an industry in the midst of change, trying to one extent or another to reflect current trends, yet without altering their

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basic approaches to subject matter or rewriting their material. Authors are obviously responding to pressure from without—particularly the civil rights movement—but with very little understanding of the neglected history they feel compelled to portray. As one reviewer notes:

> The writing is also too textbookish. This goes counter to the youth movement today. More imagination is needed. There was no material, for instance, on the rise of the alienated youth, the drug culture or pop-art. These things are history too! The authors writing the book are too emotionally remote from their audience.

And the text critiqued above is one of the better ones! A more typical text elicits this comment: "There is a general feeling that these elements [minority roles depicted in text and illustrations] have been superimposed on the book rather than integrated into it." Another text elicits this response: "Reading the text would lead one to believe that the United States is a benevolent god watching over his children." Another reviewer of the same volume carries the point even further:

> The tone of the book is an optimistic one. It is best expressed by the phrase, 'Things are getting better.' This can be a dangerous statement for students to learn. Most minority group students know that this statement is untrue and are turned off by this kind of hypocrisy. Students not only need to be aware of the problems within this society regarding ethnic groups, but they also need to learn effective strategies for change.

African-Americans

Unquestionably the pressure for text evaluation of minority roles emerged from the recent black crusade for justice. Publishers have responded to this pressure quite directly by putting blacks into texts and illustrations, and too often only in the latter. In some texts, reviewers complain, blacks are mentioned or pictured as a concession. In one text a photograph of Mayor Carl Stokes appears without a caption explaining who he is, and, the reviewer concludes the publishers were merely anxious to include a black face.

Most reviewers criticize texts for weak conceptualization of black/white relations. Hardly any text confronts "racism" as an American problem, though a few do use the term. One text receiving high ratings from reviewers includes a chapter on "Slavery: A Question of Social Conscience." However, this approach to the issue fails to confront "the massive drive of economic exploitation that went into slavery" and confuses the student with discussions of morality.

This sort of confusion is also found in factual sections. Another volume describes how George Washington grew to maturity and responsibility in 1750 by "helping to manage a small plantation...worked by twenty slaves." The authors of the text state that the future President was "learning to direct the work of others, as well as to live as a gentleman, acquiring social graces and skills." The obvious bias of such a statement could confuse students and undermine efforts at racial harmony.

Reviewers note that slavery often confuses the text writers themselves. One slavery discussion speaks of masters giving their blacks "good clothing and kind treatment," and on the other hand, attacks slavery for not doing these things. As the reviewer summarizes:

> From such evidence our advanced thinking student has little choice but to conclude the controversy being discussed is not a racist slavery at all, but good slave conditions versus bad slave conditions.

Still another text is attacked for its equal-time treatment of slavery which misses the point "that given the nature of slavery itself there could be no 'kind masters'." An equally lax treatment of slavery is represented pictorially in the text and receives this comment:

> One picture of blacks dealing with slavery shows a slave reclining on a wagon filled with hay; a few other slaves are standing around talking....This picture could lead a student to conclude that slaves had a significant amount of freedom, and that slavery wasn't particularly harsh.

White bias also infiltrates the treatment accorded slave-owners. "People who owned large numbers of slaves were rich and became important leaders in the southern states." The reviewer points out that ironically the same text takes a strong moral stand against child labor.

Several texts attempt to bridge the information gap on minorities through the use of an interdisciplinary approach. However, a basically "anti-people" approach shines through, sometimes glaringly:

> The book engrosses the reader so deeply with the methodology of the social scientists in analyzing the "American culture," that people and the human interest aspects are lost. Some persons are mentioned in conjunction with certain events with brief allusions to their role in the 'happening.'

Criticizing the treatment of minorities in another text, one reviewer states:

> Frankly, I wish the authors had not said anything about America's minorities. If they had entirely left them out, instead of token and often distorted inclusion, there could be no mistaking the fact that this book belongs on the ash pile of tired and irrelevant texts.

The same text draws this comment:

> This text if used in the schools will succeed in perpetuating the arrogant racist beliefs in the white students, and may even make some of them capable of participating in another My Lai or Wounded Knee massacre.

Some volumes have changed little if at all, still making minorities invisible despite the agitation of recent years. A student reading such a textbook could conclude that minorities have not played a significant role in the building of this nation. The contributions, achievements, culture, sufferings, and conflicts of ethnic minority groups are largely neglected and "the third world man" is never mentioned. Typical of this neglect, one text is described as:

> ...an unemotional documentary of institutions and their functions. It is depersonalized. The few persons named are leaders of movements. The hopes, dreams, achievements, disappointments, troubles, sufferings, opinions, ways of living and responses of the ordinary people who lived through the periods described are seldom involved. There is a benign indifference.

The insensitive treatment of Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831 in another text is typical of the racist biases of most. The text falsely claims that there were few slave revolts and that the Turner revolt had so-called "loved and trusted servants" suddenly killing white men, women and children in Virginia. Slavery as the precipating cause of the rebellion is never mentioned. Later on, the reviewer concludes that in this text "racism and discrimination remain hidden in the closets of American democracy."

However, many more texts than ever now include blacks in a variety of places. Though reviewers feel that some texts still ignore "inventions made by black inventors" and black cowboys, most have begun to include even these. The complaint against some texts is that they merely add a sprinkling of black figures and/or pictures without revising the content in any substantial way. Black leaders are often included, but not the masses; happy events are mentioned but not the uncomfortable ones. For example, there are photographs of "Afro-American troops" in World War I in one text, but nowhere is there any mention of segregation in American Armed Forces.

Where blacks are included, as in another text's depiction of World War II, distortion takes place. The assignment of blacks "chiefly to supply services" is attributed to "their lack of earlier educational opportunity" rather than the inherent racism of the day that proceeded from civilian to military life.

Interestingly enough, the many distortions of the positive role of blacks during Reconstruction have been altered. But even in a text that deals honestly with this era, the overthrow of the black-white governments by racist political forces and violence receives this justification which omits the feelings of black southerners: "In time white southerners became convinced that everything depended upon regaining control of their state governments."

Native Americans

Ethnocentric views pervade the coverage of native Americans. Many texts still assert that Columbus discovered America or simply begin the story of this land with his arrival, thus neglecting thousands of years of history witnessed by American Indians. Too many texts forget the Indian again after the defeat of Custer. Indifference to the suffering of the many tribes is also too often apparent. For exampie, one volume tells of Columbus "sending" ten natives to Spain, rather than calling this kidnapping and slavery. Often native tribes are described by white standards as "friendly," "quite civilized" or "uncivilized."

Hollywood stereotypes also dominate the depiction of the Indian character. One text states that the difficulty in settling the Great Plains was because "the Indians were fierce and warlike and believed they had the right to attack anyone who went across their hunting grounds." This simplistic version neglects the native claim to the land and distorts history with the word "attack." Few books cover the systematic crushing of native cultures. Racist phrases such as "half-breeds" and "savages" are common and this bias is carried into pictures that present Indians only in battle array. In one text treaties between red and white people are described as giving the red people land, when these treaties actually did the opposite. Nowhere are the counter-attacks by the Indians presented as an alternative to capitulation and surrender. Moreover, few texts consider Indian culture, or show Indians achieving anything on their own. Native Americans are depicted as "problems" for whites to solve rather than a proud and unique culture almost annihilated by whites.

Spanish-Speaking and Asian Americans

While black Americans and native Americans receive some notice, although distorted, Spanish-speaking and Asian Americans receive far less recognition. Repeatedly, books have difficulty in dealing with events such as the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, and the internment of Japanese Americans at the outset of World War II, since these represent conflicts between American economic demands and its vaulted ideals. Some volumes still glorify the military victories of the United States and ignore the social implications involved in subjecting a foreign country to American political and economic control.

In dealing with American imperialistic motives, the texts generally tend to ignore or gloss over factors that would cast doubt on the patriotism of white America. Describing what the United States did for Cuba, China, Japan and the Philippines, one text asserts: "The U.S. was committed to Cuban independence;" "American missionaries brought education, as well as the Christian religion [to China];" "The U.S. began to help Filipinos develop their country;" and, "When the U.S. sought to encourage the establishment of an orderly government, the Mexicans complained of American interference."

This ethnocentric and patronizing brand of historiography does nothing to teach American school children respect for cultural "differences." It is especially injurious to the children of minorities because it places no value on their native traditions and customs.

White Immigrant Minorities and Women

One might expect that text authors would have far less difficulty in dealing with white minorities or women, especially since some of the authors are minority group members and females. However, the vast bulk of 25 texts indicate that this is not the case. Volume after volume still offers the "melting pot" thesis. One reviewer found a text to be completely neglectful of all minorities:

> We are virtually unaware that minorities exist until near the end of the text. It's almost as if problems, culture, etc., of minorities did not exist in history until white society became aware and socially conscious of them.

Still another text casually assumes the same when it states that the President of the United States "speaks for all Americans."

To explain that the treatment accorded 19th century immigrants is "miniscule" one reviewer states:

> The problems faced by Catholics, for example, get cursory attention, although the problem was massive and sustained. The so-called "new" immigration beginning in the late 19th century is described briefly, but no effort is made to describe contributions and achievements of such groups or to deal with the forms of discriminatory behavior toward them.

Another volume details restrictive immigration laws but provides no understanding of their racial basis. One text speaks of immigrant clanishness as leading to the creation of ghettos in the New World with no mention of hostile reactions to newcomers by the "Old Stock."

"It is disheartening," writes a reviewer, "to read about immigrant achievements in one small paragraph." Immigrants have also failed to make it into the pictorial section of books. One volume with over 700 illustrations has 16 with blacks, 13 with native Americans, and two with immigrants. Another text feels that the ethnic ghettos were formed solely to "preserve the way of living that was familiar to them."

With minorities receiving such shallow understanding, it is no wonder that some texts still present racist interpretations of these minorities. One book speaks of the fact that after World War I "some Americans disliked foreigners. They believed that the languages, customs, and living habits of these people did not fit in with American ways." This leaves the reader with the impression that this is an acceptable viewpoint. Still another text describes Klu Klux Klan members as "honest and hardworking Americans" who opposed gangsters, favored Prohibition and "pledged themselves to lead virtuous lives and protect the 'American Way'."

Women receive scant attention in most texts, and many reviewers do not even mention the inclusion of material about women as a criterion for evaluation. As one reviewer notes, "One is left with the feeling that women played little or no role in the making of the American experience." In this text women received three paragraphs out of 832 printed pages. In another volume, the reviewer notes:

> I wonder if the authors of this text ever considered the fact that about half their readers would be young women?.... Probably it will take considerable pressure before the political and psychological history of women is integrated into high school textbooks.

Several glaring instances of the mistreatment accorded women in texts illustrate the depth of this particular problem. One volume says, "Women were once the object of strong prejudice," as though the situation had been cleared up by now. Another text writer refers to the "smart" move of George Washington in marrying a rich widow—perpetuating the vicious concept that women should be used rather than viewed as people in their own right.

On the basis of their findings, the Michigan State Department of Education warned educators to avoid relying on the text as the single source of information in the classroom. Recommended are the large amount of supplementary material available from publishers today. Since the focus was on basic texts in American history, no evaluation was made of this array of supplementary material, nor were there suggestions for its appropriate use. In view of their findings that regular texts are so deficient, this may well be an appropriate field for investigation.

There are some encouraging notes to *The Textbook Report* of 1973. In 1968, the Michigan State Department of Education reviewed eight social studies textbooks and found all "woefully inadequate." Today some books have positive ratings. However, their careful comment is: "Apparently since that date, improvements have been made. But still, one might expect that by this time more publishers would be doing better."

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